

IT SHOULDN'T HAPPEN TO A VET: *LAST FLAG FLYING* [February 2018, *Sight & Sound*]

Last Flag Flying isn't a sequel to Hal Ashby's bleak 1974 navy shore patrol drama *The Last Detail*, starring Jack Nicholson – quite. It's a free adaptation of Darryl Ponicsan's 2005 novel of the same title, which is a sequel partly to that film and partly to his own 1970 novel, which was adapted by Robert Towne. Linklater has turned Billy 'Badass' Buddusky (played by Nicholson) into Sal Nealon (Bryan Cranston); Richard Mulhall (Otis Young) into Richard Mueller (Laurence Fishburne); and the younger Larry Meadows (Randy Quaid) into [Larry] 'Doc' Meadows (Steve Carell). I met Richard Linklater in London two days before the film's London première at the London Film Festival.

Philip Horne: I'm interested in the process behind *Last Flag Flying*, because I read the original novel – *The Last Detail* – which is tremendous, almost better than the film – and *Last Flag Flying*; and then of course the movie does all these interesting things...

Richard Linklater: Darryl says it's actually one of the more faithful adaptations, even though we changed things, because it adheres to the *structure* of the book so well, whereas *Last Detail* kind of stopped, you know – it's only a part of it. Even though we create a whole different backstory – Vietnam, which is not in *The Last Detail*, and we do so many things different –

PH: But you end up essentially in the same place... How did you get involved first?

RL: The book was kind of floating around... Darryl... I think he felt that he had a lot to say and that those three guys were speaking to him, even, you know [laughs], beyond the grave in Billy's case. So yeah, I think that book was a bit of a purge, *Last Flag Flying*, so I kind of responded to that – a lot of humour, passion and anger – there was a lot of anger, and that was exactly how *I* was feeling. So I pursued it. Darryl liked what I was doing. He was a good partner all the way down the line.

PH Was the fact that Jack Nicholson passed on the project actually liberating for you?

RL Yeah, well I was not... *disappointed*, put it like that. Cos yeah, it would have been very different. Put it like this, I'm glad the way it all worked out. Anyhow I worked on the adaptation and had all these ideas and we just couldn't get it off the ground, *then*. And I think the open wound of that war at that time... In wartime, no one wanted to deal with it. But I told Darryl, 'This isn't going away: we're gonna make this film some day.' And, you know, ten years later, the time was right...

PH Is this movie a unique case? In that the sequel novel only exists because the original movie changed the ending and allowed Billy to survive. It is a bit of a fudge at the beginning of the sequel novel...

RL Yeah, like 'I thought you were dead!' – 'No, I got a plate in my head!' Yeah, it's great not to have to deal with that.

PH So then the novel *Last Flag Flying* is a like a sequel to the original movie rather than the original novel – or...

RL Yeah, somewhere in between.

PH And then in adapting the sequel novel you make it freestanding again. I can't think of any other cases like it.

RL I'm trying to think of any.

PH You usually do a certain amount of rewriting at the rehearsal stage.

RL Always, yeah. They always accuse me of improvising, but *that's* the phase where I improvise. Not on set, but in rehearsal. Not like rehearsal acting exercise improv, it's just talking, finding new thoughts, and a lot of humour I think comes out of that process. Reworking the material, and trying to involve the actors, just trying to get the right pitch, you know? The right words. The timing and everything. So for me it's a real refining process of what the movie's gonna be. It's not so performance-based, really, it's more writer-based, I think, my rehearsal process.

PH So the actors are like co-writers?

RL Yeah, we're kind of sitting around, pens in hand, talking. 'Let's hear it again, let's read through it.' It feels more writerly than actorly... But it's not real till you start hearing it, because words on a page are pretty abstract. It's so funny, films are completely judged as scripts, but to me that's just nothing...

PH You realise things about the story at that stage that you hadn't seen before?

RL Yeah, once you start hearing it out loud you think, 'Why, that doesn't make any sense...' I like to look at it and think, 'Why would he...?' It's amazing the things that by reading it and just hearing it in your head you *still* don't know – until you have it in the physical manifested form of hearing it. It takes it to another level when you're on location. To me, there are several steps in the metamorphosis to, you know, achieving lift-off. The big thing for me is rehearsal, just hearing it out loud. To me it's all about the ear.

PH So for you working with the actors is the primary experience?

RL Yeah, I'm always trying to figure out what the film wants to be... It's that the *vibe* will be defined by how my cast gets along, interact, what their strengths and weaknesses, what their vibes are. Certain things won't be achieved based on what's there. But that will be more than replaced by what *is* there that couldn't have been anticipated... I've got my antennae up the whole time, going, like 'Oh! That's an interesting thing you do. What if we do that?' To me it's wonderful fun. It's the most alive. I think a lot of directors would say they like editing the most, but I like rehearsing and shooting the most, because to me that's where it's happening.

PH That bond of actual friendship from Vietnam in the movie is a thing you could only have because of its *not* being a sequel – because in *The Last Detail* they're only together travelling from Virginia to New Hampshire for that short period, aren't they? They've never met before and they never meet again afterwards.

RL And they're just thrown together.... It was the freedom we were granted by adapting in a way, to actually add something that would bond you... Those people – you're bonded for life... To me, the thing is so much about friendship, about these guys who were kind of generous with each other. They just see each other's humanity – to that degree, and you know, can find humour in the oddest places.

PH It's really interesting the way you feed us bits about what happened in the past in Vietnam.

RL I thought it was important in this to give them actual Vietnam experience... You know, what goes on there, it's still not big, it's not like, oh, the My Lai massacre, you know... it's pretty typical. They'd lost some friends... and they were fucked up on drugs, and in the big scheme of things you would think, 'Oh, it's not that big a thing' – but to the individual psyche it's a *huge* thing.

PH And what we learn about the incident that haunts them is fragmentary...

RL Yeah. We give bits and pieces, and I wanted to dole it out, because you know guys who've been through that, they don't usually talk about it much. These guys are hesitant to even talk about it. They talk in half-thoughts and sentences, so it was a challenge to communicate... to let the viewer put together that something happened, but not say 100% what.

PH You've said a lot of your films are personal explorations of ideas you want to come to terms with, and also that it's the story that gets you first...

RL Yeah, it's like, 'Why are you grabbed by this story? Is it these three guys, or this war backdrop, or...' You know. The mixed feelings. I think the film ultimately is a picture of the love-hate relationship a lot of people end up with – particularly with service members you get this – anyone who's trapped in this big bureaucracy often ends up at odds with it. But you can love it at the same time, like Sal's character: truly, he felt like those were the best years, and it made sense. He's one of those guys who liked the regiment of it all. Mueller not so much so. But there they were. But for me personally, yeah, it probably pervades the film, my own inbuilt...

PH I made a connection with sport, because in *Dazed and Confused* there's that thing the coach says at the end, 'No one's paying you to think'...

RL [Laughs] Yeah! It's like life is challenging you with these authority figures who are telling you not to think, just to do what they say. I've always bristled at that. I had a job once offshore. I was the manual labour part of it – I was young – and I had a boss. Maybe I did something wrong, who knows? But he said, 'You don't think! You're getting paid from *here* down', pointing at his neck: 'From here down! Don't think! Just do.' You know, like, that getting robbed of your brain. I thought that was such a funny line. I haven't put that in a movie yet. I will some day. Yeah, it's just that you bristle at that authority. And could you get more top-down bureaucratic authority than the military? It's maddeningly hierarchical. Some people find comfort in it, though.

PH: Cranston and Fishburne give wonderful performances, but I noticed that there are quite a few moments when there are big close-ups on Steve Carell, maybe slightly unexpectedly. You've said this is really Doc's story. He's a quiet character, but essentially he's sort of the audience for a lot of what's going on, is that right?

RL: Yeah. He's the one getting pulled through. You know, it's this nightmare narrative that has fallen on him that he has to live through. I think time is probably moving at a different rate for him from anybody else. Just the last two days of his life feel like an eternity. Finding out about his son's death, and then deciding what to do, he feels like he's just walking in this nightmare. But these guys pull him back into some reality, you know. Steve asked me, you know, before even deciding to do the movie, 'Why do you think Doc goes and looks these guys up?' They have that history, but why...? And I was like, 'You know, I'm not really sure.' [Laughs] And there's a kind of actor who would run

away when the director doesn't have the answer to that, but Steve liked that. He said 'Yeah, I think Doc just doesn't know why he's doing *anything*, you know'. He's following an impulse but he can't consciously intellectualise this, so yeah, it's a pure emotional, instinctual journey...

PH: It's a great moment when they arrive at the Arlington Cemetery and they realise Doc has just been confused...

RL: They're in the wrong state! Yeah, that's the kind of thing – in the editing room, my editor was like, 'Can't we just cut that?' and I said, 'No, that's kind of great, just that you've gone the wrong way.' Those subtle looks that Sal and Mueller gave each other, like 'Doc is not okay. He's not all here. [Laughs] Like, what have we gotten ourselves into?'

PH: But then they're quite gentle with him, aren't they?

RL: Yeah. Well, he's a gentle soul himself. Yes, Steve gives this really beautiful interior performance... He was going off his own... His dad had fought in World War II, and never talked about it, has a certain stoicism, and he was really playing... he really felt that.

PH: And *Where'd You Go, Bernadette*? – have you shot that already?

RL: Yeah, I'm editing. We only wrapped about two and a half weeks ago, so I'm still recovering. The Russian vessel we were in got caught in an Arctic hurricane! [Laughs] It's a longish story. Suffice to say... yeah, we got it – *barely*. It was pretty rigorous. It's an epic kind of structure to that movie; we cover a lot of ground. Fun, though – very fun. I'm excited about it. Cate Blanchett, and Kristen Wiig plays Audrey the neighbour. It's kind of a wonderful cast. Billy Crudup is LG the husband. Lawrence Fishburne plays the architect friend, he came on board... a lot of great people. It's set in Seattle, and we shot a little in Seattle, we shot second unit in Antarctica, because right now it's winter, or when we were shooting, so we went up to the North Pole. That's where we got caught. Because they have icebergs. Everything but penguins, you gotta put those in. So it was a good experience. And it's sort of like *Last Flag*, it's got that you know middle-age thing... you know, it's a woman's movie but it echoes a certain way – how time changes you, and are you who you are in relation to who you were as a younger person...

PH: Which makes me ask how Jesse and Celine are doing, because with the nine-year-gaps that time is coming up...

RL: I don't know! We're about the five-year mark. This is usually around the time we have an idea. But it hasn't happened yet. We've got four more years. We were joking, it takes us about five years to recover from those. They're pretty rigorous. But yeah, you know, if at age fiftyish, Jesse and Celine have something to say... we'll do it. I always say I don't want to do it just to do it. Unless there's something we feel compelled to share. Again, I'm not going to *force* it. To jump from a trilogy to a quadrology, or tetralogy, is that what you call it?

PH: Although *Last Flag Flying* is a period film in a sense, because it's about 2003, it could be about the class of people who voted for Trump – they feel betrayed by the government, and angry and their politics are a little bit up for grabs...

RL: Yeah, it's an interesting dynamic that's played out in the American Right... In the last election, in the debates, they would ask, 'How many of you think that the last Iraq War was a mistake?' – and they all raised their hands. The Republican platform, to a person – well, maybe not Jeb Bush, because his

brother started it... So that's when I knew times had changed. I was like, 'Okay, *Last Flag* is ready. The whole culture can deal with Iraq now.' ...

PH: America today seems incredibly divided...

RL: [Laughs] I can't tell you who my characters voted for. I'm pretty sure Mueller didn't vote for Trump, but I can't tell you that Sal didn't vote for Trump... Sal *might* have voted for Trump. So this film is showing guys that are pretty far apart in their belief systems, obviously you have a pretty sworn atheist, and a man of the cloth. But I think it kind of shows how – because they're old friends – they can joke about things, and find humour in their humanity, they don't hate each other. There's a certain love and camaraderie. That really stems from a long time ago, you know, so they're bonded there, which is kind of beautiful. But there's a kind of understanding, or healing – and though the film depicts very different people – in Mueller and Sal's case, there's different race, beliefs and choices – they get along. So maybe the film has a uniting feel. They can all unite in their frustration with the Man. [Laughs] When the Man's wrong.